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AUTHOR Moles, Oliver C., Ed.
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ABSTRACT

Recognizing the critical role parents have in developing their children's learning habits, this booklet offers strategies that focus on ways principals and teachers can communicate with diverse families about: (1) school goals, programs, activities, and procedures; (2) the progress of individual students; and (3) home activities which can improve children's school learning. A special emphasis is placed on making all school contacts friendly and welcoming to the diverse families being served, highlighting outreach strategies which encourage two-way communication through personal contacts including: (1) "Early Fall Mailings"; (2) "Home-School Handbooks"; (3) "Open House"; (4) "School-Parent Compacts"; (5) "Parent-Teacher Conferences"; (6) "Parent Liaisons"; (7) "Newsletters"; (8) "Positive Phone Calls"; (9) "Homework and Home Learning"; (10) "Parent Resource Centers"; (11) "Informal School-Family Gatherings"; (12) "Parent Workshops"; (13) "Secondary School Strategies"; (13) "Strategies for Children with Special Needs"; (14) "Involving Parents with Limited English Skills"; (15) "Involving Single and Working Parents"; and (16) "Involving Fathers." A separate page explains six services offered by the U.S. Department of Education and lists 10 free and related publications. (AMC)

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Reaching All Families

Creating Family-Friendly Schools

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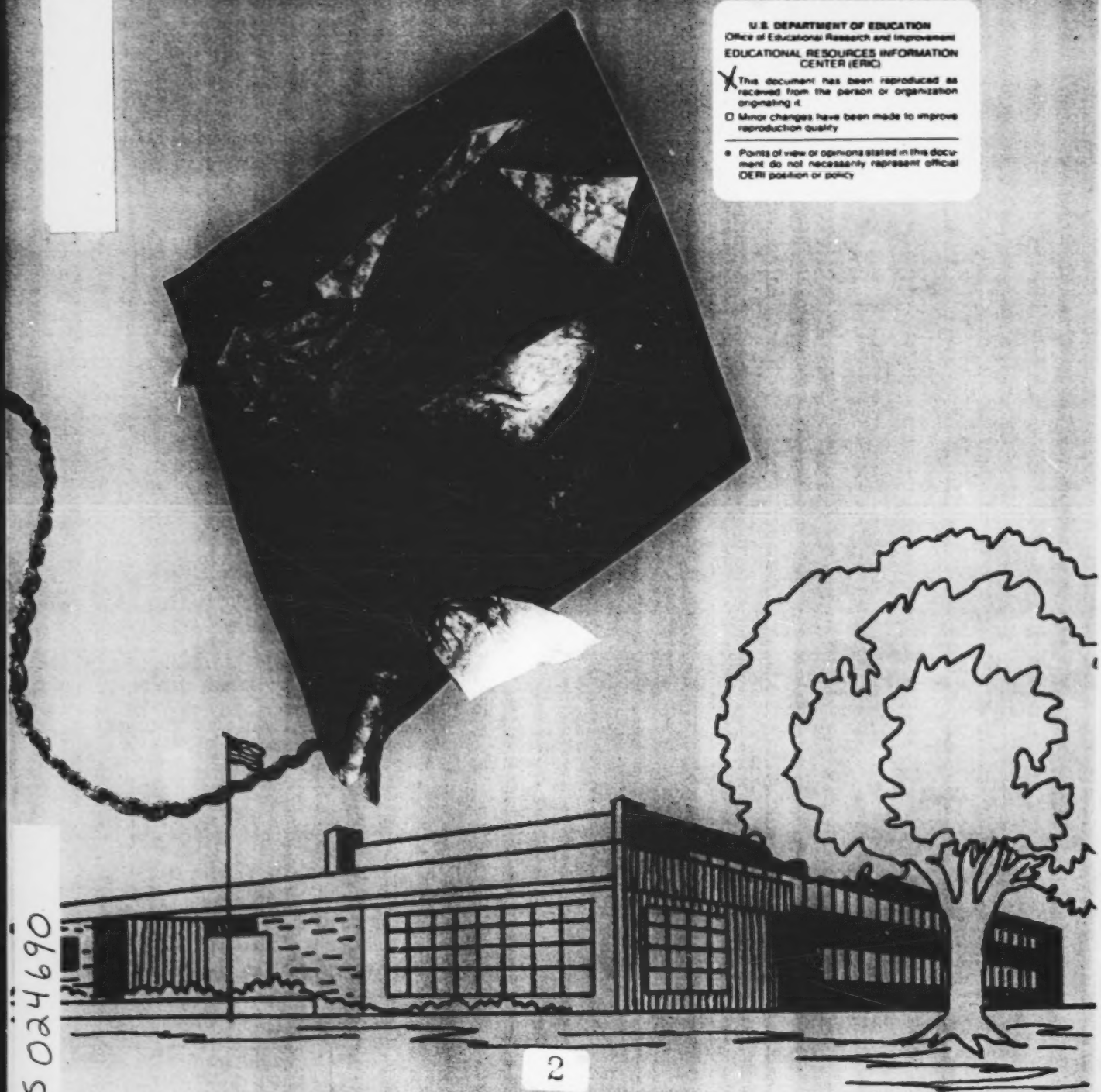

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Office of Educational Research and Improvement
U.S. Department of Education

Reaching All Families

Creating Family-Friendly Schools

Edited by

Oliver C. Moles

U.S. Department of Education
Office of Educational Research and Improvement

U.S. Department of Education
Richard W. Riley
Secretary

Office of Educational Research and Improvement
Sharon P. Robinson
Assistant Secretary

National Institute on the Education of At-Risk Students
Edward J. Fuentes
Director

Media and Information Services
Cynthia Hearn Dorfman
Director

August 1996

The illustrations in this book are self-portraits drawn by friends and family of the U.S. Department of Education. Ranging from 3 to 17 years old, these young people are from diverse backgrounds, and many have participated in public school programs such as English as a Second Language, gifted and talented, and services for students with special needs. The artists as they appear are:

Cover art: Elian Silverman

Inside art:

Riley Smith	Page iii
Michael Jackson	Page iv
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Sharon V. Scales II	Page 4
Ian Weisz	Page 14
Jenny (Mee Sun) Park	Page 22
Bobby Lewis	Page 32
Emily Dorfman	Page 44

This booklet is offered to stimulate thinking and discussion about how schools can better involve all families, regardless of family circumstances or student performance, in their children's education. It is a work in progress, and we welcome your suggestions for changes and additions. We would especially like to hear about effective programs or practices to create family-friendly schools that have worked in your community. Send your comments to the Partnership for Family Involvement in Education, 600 Independence Avenue SW, Washington, DC 20202–8173 or fax them to 202–401–3036.

Foreword

It is well known that when families, educators, and communities all work together, schools get better and students get the high quality education they need to lead productive lives. Education is about discovering the special skills and talents of children and guiding their learning according to high standards.

For me the important and positive news in education is the critical role parents have in developing their children's learning habits. A recent Department report, *Reading Literacy in the United States*, tells us that there is a substantial gap in the reading scores between schools that involve parents and schools that do not. Principals, teachers, and parents should take heed.

Parents are the essential link in improving American education, and schools simply have to do a better job of reaching out to them. Sending a report card home is not enough. Parents want to help their children succeed in school, and often need guidance on how to be most effective.

This publication is designed for school administrators and teachers, to help them involve parents and families as more active participants in their children's education. The strategies suggested here are appropriate for all students, including students with special needs.

A special emphasis is placed on making all school contacts friendly and welcoming to the diverse families being served. A variety of possible school strategies are discussed. Here are some straightforward suggestions for helping to involve families, both as partners at back-to-school time and throughout the school year.

Richard W. Riley
Secretary of Education

Acknowledgments

This booklet represents the work of many people. It includes the educators, parents, and community representatives who shared information on promising approaches and programs while helping the Massachusetts Department of Education create the original strategy fact sheets. Various units within the Department also shared information on how they promote parent involvement, and several nearby schools provided suggestions. Finally, teams of principals, teachers, and parents from twenty-one communities offered strategies and program ideas on communication and outreach to "hard to reach" families.

Special thanks go to Barbara Aschheim of the Massachusetts Department of Education for information on the fact sheets and encouragement to use them, to Diane D'Angelo for providing a computer copy of the sheets, and to Judith Anderson, Adriana de Kanter, and Terry Peterson who offered many good suggestions for this adaptation. Bob LeGrand carefully edited the final version, and Phil Carr set the type. Finally, this booklet is dedicated to the memory of Ross Zerchykov, a longtime advocate for citizen participation in education who was a developer of the original fact sheets.

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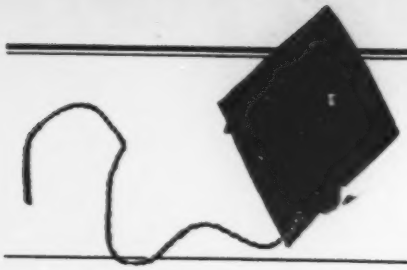

An Introduction to Reaching All Families

This booklet presents accumulated knowledge and fresh ideas on school outreach strategies. With them, schools can reach out to all families and help involve them in their children's education.*

Some of the strategies are widely used, such as the fall open house and parent-teacher conferences. Others, like parent resource centers and positive phone calls, are much less common. Within each strategy, suggestions for action are made. These are based on broad experience, which can help even seasoned teachers, principals, and district officials do a better job of making their schools family-friendly.

Many parents prepare their children well for school on their own and contact the schools as needed. Working with such parents requires little effort. But there are many others who want to help their children learn more, yet do not come to school. This fact should not be taken as evidence that they do not care about their children's education (Chavkin & Williams, 1989; Epstein, 1983; Moles, 1993).

Job and family demands leave little free time for many parents. Others who stay away tend to be racial and ethnic minorities, and those who have less income and less ease with the English language. Their children are more often at risk of failing in school (Smith et al., 1995). In growing up they may also have had negative school experiences. Involving such hard to reach families is a challenge.

It may seem surprising, but surveys show that most parents, regardless of their background, want guidance from the schools on ways to help their children learn better (Chavkin & Williams, 1989; Epstein, 1986). Thus parents look to schools for help even if they do not or cannot make the first contact themselves. Making parents feel welcome in the school is the first step to helping them.

*Many family forms exist today and biological parents are often not the main caregivers to children. The term families is used in this booklet to refer to the various settings for child rearing today. The term parents is also used here in an inclusive sense.

A new National Education Goal calls on every school to promote partnerships and increase parent participation in the growth of children. Reaching and involving all parents and families is important if the United States is to educate all students to high standards, such as those recommended by the Goals 2000: Educate America Act.

The strategies in this booklet focus on ways principals and teachers can communicate with all families about

- school goals, programs, activities, and procedures;
- the progress of individual students; and
- home activities which can improve children's school learning.

The section on homework and home learning offers many suggestions. Studies show that activities initiated by the school to change the home educational environment can have a strong influence on school performance, especially in schools serving low-income and minority families (Graue, Weinstein & Walberg, 1983; Henderson & Berla, 1994; Leler, 1983; Moles, 1993).

The different strategies are designed to build on each other or fit special circumstances; none of them is a cure-all by itself. Some are ways of introducing the school to families early in the school year. Others focus on ongoing communications or how to contact special groups of parents. Strategies to help workshops reach more families successfully also are discussed.

Strategies which encourage two-way communication through personal contacts are highlighted. If families are to be involved as true partners in their children's education, it is important to provide ongoing opportunities to hear their concerns and comments as well as providing them information. Together, teachers and parents make a great team to help children get a good start for life.

Schools which participate in the federal Title I program may be able to use Title I funds to pay for activities related to some of the strategies in this

booklet. These activities include training for parents to help improve their children's achievement and to learn about child rearing issues, creating school-based parent resource centers, training and supporting parents to enhance the involvement of other parents, and reducing transportation and child care costs so parents can participate in school-related meetings and training sessions. For more information on the parent involvement aspects of Title I call 202–260–0965. Section 1118 of the Improving America's Schools Act of 1994 describes these efforts. Schools should contact their local education agency for assistance.

Most of the strategies in this booklet are adapted from *Parent Involvement Fact Sheets* and *Parent-School Collaboration: A Compendium of Strategies for Parent Involvement*. Both of these booklets were published by the Massachusetts Department of Education, and are used with permission. These materials were originally developed with extensive input from schools and parent involvement experts. They have been widely distributed to schools, including those with Title I federal programs.

This publication is designed for easy use by teams of teachers and administrators. Each activity can be easily copied or the booklet can be physically divided by task for use by team members. Some of the strategies in this booklet apply to school-level activities. These sheets might be directed to the staff persons in charge of each such activity. Other strategies may be useful to all teachers or other members of the staff. Schools may want to reproduce some of these strategy sheets to make them widely available.

This booklet is produced in collaboration with the Partnership for Family Involvement in Education, a joint endeavor of the U.S. Department of Education and more than 700 family, education, community, religious, and business organizations dedicated to developing family-school-community partnerships for learning to high standards. A publication of the Partnership, *Strong Families, Strong Schools*, (U.S. Department of Education, 1994) provides additional examples on how schools can reach out to families. For more information on the Partnership call 1–800–USA–LEARN.

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Daddy

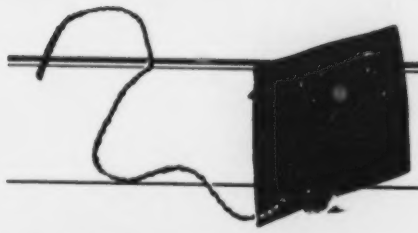
mommy

Lenora

Sharon

Introducing School Policies and Programs

This first set of strategies focuses on the beginning of the school year. Early school contacts will alert parents to important school policies and programs. They also send the message that right from the start the school welcomes and expects all families to be partners in the education of their children. Open house is one such strategy. Before it will come early fall mailings. These might include a home-school handbook and an invitation to join in a school-parent compact. Valuable tips on how to develop each of these are provided in the following pages.



Early Fall Mailings

The beginning of the school year is a key time to communicate with parents. Some will be new to the school. All will want to know what to expect from schools and new teachers, and how they can help their children learn. Some of this information can easily be mailed to parents or other responsible family members.

Welcome Letters

Welcome letters are generally sent home by teachers at the beginning of the school year or when a new student enrolls. Some items for these letters might include

- a list of basic subjects and broad plans for the year;
- a list of materials the child will need for class;
- a phone number and time when the teacher can be reached; and
- a sincere invitation to share concerns and provide assistance to parents as they help their child with school work.

Remember to use clear, simple language and short sentences that avoid education jargon so all can understand. (See information under *Newsletters* for more on how to make written material engaging.)

Information Packets

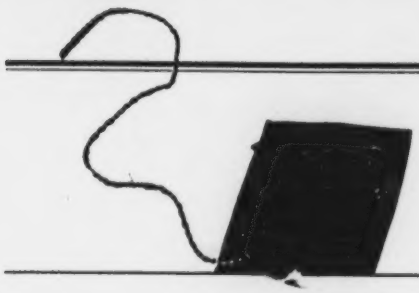
These materials can be distributed at open houses in the fall. Schools often mail these items to all parents who do not pick them up at the open house.

- School handbooks and information sheets can contain updated lists of school policies and special programs. They also can contain services offered by the school and telephone numbers of school officials, parent leaders, and room parents.
- If the school, district, or community has a school-home connection through a local cable channel, e-mail, or homework hotline, highlight how it can be easily accessed.

Calendars

Monthly or annual calendars highlight upcoming school events and meetings. Here are some tips for calendar preparation:

- Calendars can be designed to be posted conveniently on the refrigerator door. Some include ideas for each day on ways families can help children learn. For example, "Have your child identify the items in the kitchen that are square, oblong, and triangular."
- Television programs or movies that the family may enjoy together can be noted.
- Upcoming community events for families can be listed.
- Supplements with more information and event schedules can be mailed later.



Home-School Handbooks

The home-school handbook provides families with a handy information packet about the school. Handbooks help parents understand school policies and programs and become aware of the ways they and their children can be involved in the school.

Content

A home-school handbook serves as the school's calling card, establishing a tone for its relations with its families. It also serves as a parents' yellow pages, providing all the basic information they need. But make sure all phone numbers, dates, and locations are up to date. Handbooks can contain the following:

- Statement of school goals and philosophy.
- Discipline policy and code.
- Operations and procedures regarding
  - ✔ grades and pupil progress reports;
  - ✔ absence and tardiness;
  - ✔ how to inquire about student difficulties;
  - ✔ emergency procedures for weather and other events; and
  - ✔ transportation schedules and provisions for after school activities.
- Special programs at the school such as after-school enrichment or child care programs
- Parent involvement policies and practices at the school, with items that describe
  - ✔ "Bill of Rights" for parents;
  - ✔ "Code of Responsibilities" for parents;
  - ✔ open house and parent-teacher conferences; and
  - ✔ involvement opportunities such as volunteer programs, advisory councils, and PTAs.
- A calendar of major school events throughout the year: holidays, vacations, regular PTA meetings, report card periods, open houses, and other regularly scheduled school-home contacts.
- Names and phone numbers of key school contact people.
- Names and phone numbers of parent leaders (e.g., members of advisory councils, key people in parent organizations, and room parents.)
- A tear-off response form allowing parents to ask questions, voice concerns, and volunteer at the school.

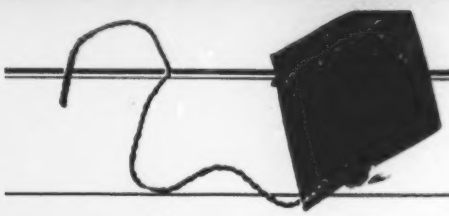
The handbook could be distributed at schoolwide gatherings such as open house and parent-teacher meetings, or through the mail to those who do not attend. The main idea is to get the handbook to everyone early in the school year and discuss it briefly if possible when it is presented.
While it is tempting to include as much information as possible, avoid making a handbook too long; otherwise many parents will put it aside.

Handbook Preparation

Handbooks that are prepared collaboratively by administrators, teachers, and parents are able to reflect the interests of each group. If administrators develop the book, they may want to ask teachers, parent groups, student associations, and others to review it in draft form.

Other tips for successful handbook preparation:

- Use clear, simple language that avoids educational jargon.
- Use in-service days to familiarize staff with the handbook so they can be effective in using it with parents.
- Translate the handbook into the languages spoken by school parents.
- Make sure teachers, and parent and student leaders approve of and understand the content of the handbook.



Open House

Schools need to share information about their programs with all parents. One widespread approach is the open house. It is a great way to welcome all families to the school. The open house works best if schools:

- Hold them just once or twice a year.
- Schedule them at times of low "calendar conflict."
- Attend to the 3 P's—publicity, planning, and preparation.

Publicity

A carefully thought-out publicity campaign is essential to success. The open house should be scheduled about a month after classes start so that teachers are somewhat familiar with their students, and there is time to contact all parents. Districts need to hold their schools' open houses on different evenings so parents with children in more than one school and teachers who have school-age children can attend each open house.

The most important element in success is to set an expectation among all students that their parents will attend. The following strategies may be helpful in a publicity campaign:

- Have students design personal invitations to the event for their parents.
- Mail every parent an invitation from the school which explains in detail the event and what parents can expect to learn.
- Note on the invitation the transportation and child care arrangements that the school will provide.
- Hang posters developed by classes of students in local grocery stores, banks, and the public library.
- Set aside time for teachers and parent volunteers to call all parents, particularly new parents, a day or so before the event to personally invite them.
- Use the loud speaker to remind all children on the day of the event that the school staff is eager to meet their parents that evening at the open house.

Planning

Open houses are successful when they meet the real needs of parents. The best way to insure success is to involve parents in the planning process. Open house programs could include:

- A welcoming session, led by the principal, introducing the teaching staff and the school's philosophy.
- A tour of the school.
- Time for parents to meet in their children's classrooms and hear about the year's curriculum and the teachers' expectations. Encourage parents to try some of the student activities.
- A chance to meet and talk with children's teachers. Make sure parents have enough time to ask questions.
- Open houses can also include an opportunity for teachers to
  - ✔ demonstrate some of the activities which will take place in their classrooms;
  - ✔ describe the kinds of assistance they would like from parents; and
  - ✔ give parents a chance to ask questions about the upcoming school year.

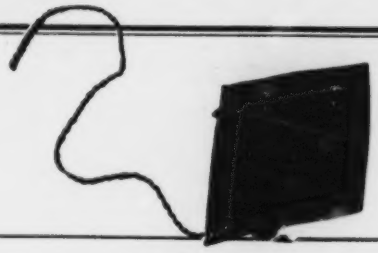
Preparation

The school will want to convey a warm and inviting atmosphere to parents and insure that teacher and staff presentations are informative and enjoyable. The administrative team can contribute to the success of the open house by

- arranging to direct parents with clearly marked signs and support staff around the building;
- making sure arrangements for child care and transportation run smoothly;
- providing translators for parents who do not speak English;
- arranging for a display table that has copies of the school's annual report, handbooks, discipline codes, and other items of interest to parents;
- requesting art classes to prepare a welcome sign for parents and put art work all around the school;
- requesting that bulletin boards are bright and up-to-date; and
- encouraging band and chorus classes to play and sing in small groups around the school before and after the open house activities.

Teachers can help by

- making clear, brief presentations about the curriculum and teacher expectations;
- preparing handouts for parents that reinforce their presentations and involve parents in a typical interesting class activity; and
- increasing parent enjoyment of the open house with techniques such as
  - ✔ displaying unfinished student work to give parents a sneak preview of what's in store for their children;
  - ✔ giving parents a chance to complete a few of the activities on which their children have been working; and
  - ✔ inviting children to conduct a few learning activities with their parents.



School-Parent Compacts

Many schools are developing voluntary agreements between the home and school to define goals, expectations, and shared responsibilities of schools and parents as partners in student learning. In fact the federal Title I program requires all participating schools to develop with their Title I parents a compact that outlines how parents, school staff, and students will work to improve student achievement and build partnerships to help children achieve to high standards.

Compacts incorporate the unique ideas and activities of different school communities. They usually have sections for schools, parents, and their children to sign if they choose. As an example, the Title I requirements are paraphrased below.

School responsibilities (1) describe how the school will provide high quality curriculum and instruction in a supportive and effective learning environment that enables students to meet high performance standards, and (2) note the importance of communication between teachers and parents on an ongoing basis by such means as

- ✔ parent-teacher conferences in elementary schools, including discussion of how the compact relates to the child's achievement;
- ✔ frequent reports to parents on their children's progress; and
- ✔ reasonable access to staff, to observe classroom activities, and to volunteer and participate in their child's class.

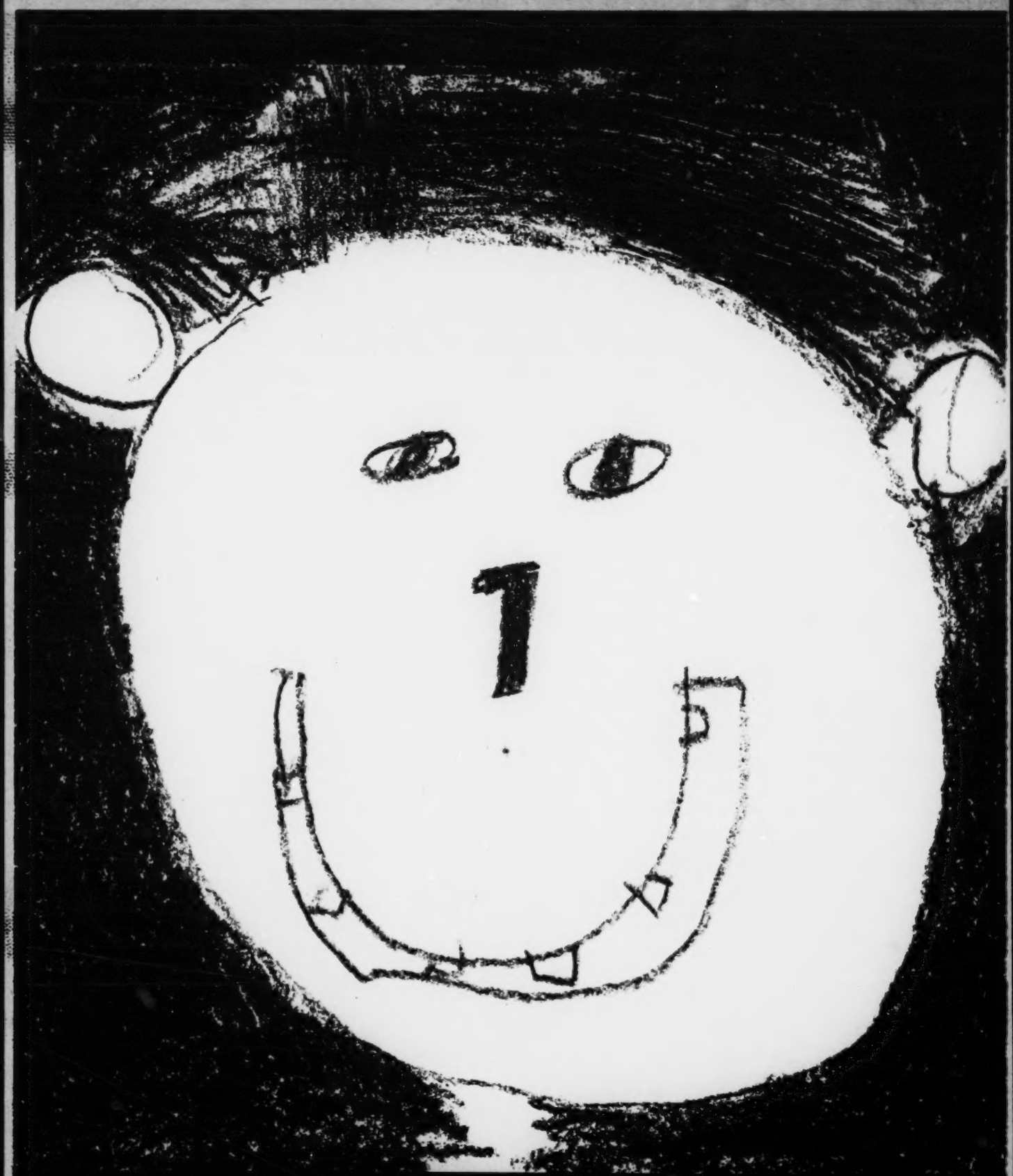
Parent responsibilities indicate some ways that parents can support their children's learning by

- ✔ monitoring school attendance, homework completion, and television watching;
- ✔ volunteering in their child's classroom; and
- ✔ taking part, as appropriate, in decisions on the education of their children and constructive use of extracurricular time.

Students might also sign the parent's section or a more student-focused statement of home learning responsibilities.

Compacts need to be used in combination with other family involvement activities, not as the only way schools communicate with parents. They are more likely to be effective when well planned, appropriate to the situation, sensitive to individual needs, flexible, and accompanied by supports of money, time, and teacher and parent training.

The U.S. Department of Education is producing a booklet on compacts with examples from schools around the country. Title I of the Improving America's Schools Act, which provides resources to schools needing extra help to strengthen programs in the basics and core academics, encourages the creation of school-parent compacts in half of the nation's schools. For more information on school-parent compacts, call 202–260–0965.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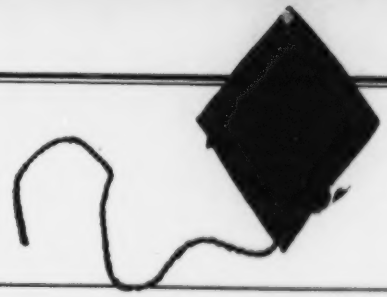
Personal Contacts

The best chance for teachers and other school staff to become acquainted with the families of students is through personal contacts. In face-to-face contacts people exchange a wide range of information: detailed views and concerns as well as observations of each other and the meeting surroundings. The parent-teacher conference is a common if brief form of personal contact which may be arranged for all families once or twice a year. Richer contacts are likely to occur in home visits because they demonstrate strong interest in students' families. Parent liaisons can also help schools respond to the needs and concerns of families. How to make the best use of these strategies is explored in this section.



Parent-Teacher Conferences

Regular parent-teacher conferences for all families are an essential building block of home-school communication. Parents provide important perspectives and information that can be extremely valuable. Teachers need the help of parents to do the best possible job of educating every child and can help parents play an active role in education at home. Conferences are a time for listening and sharing. They can reinforce the idea of working as a team.

Conferences also provide an opportunity for teachers to explain the criteria and grades used on report cards. In fact, many schools schedule conferences right after a reporting period. Some use the conference itself as the means to distribute report cards.

Conferences are successful when teachers and the school system create a climate that invites collaboration with parents. Creating this climate involves planning and effort. The following suggestions indicate ways teachers, principals, and school systems can maximize the effectiveness of parent-teacher conferences.

Before the Conference

Principals and District Officials—Principals and district officials play a critical role by coordinating activities and providing encouragement to teachers. Some organizing principles are suggested.

Prepare Teachers for Conferences

- Use in-service meetings to orient teachers to the system's goals and effective procedures for conferences.
- Role playing exercises can help teachers, especially new teachers, to anticipate and deal positively with typical parent questions.

Allocate Resources

- Allot sufficient time for teachers to conduct conferences and provide substitutes if added time is needed.
- Provide child care and refreshments, and transportation if needed.
- Arrange translation services and let parents know that they are available.
- Develop a flexible conference schedule that will provide options for working parents and parents who have more than one child in the school.

Involve Parents Well in Advance

- Let parents know about upcoming conferences through various channels—letters, newsletters, radio and television announcements, PTA meetings, and community cable television channels.
- Survey parents to identify their areas of concern.
- Send parents a conference planning sheet which outlines a set of questions they may want to ask teachers.
- Ask parent volunteers to telephone parents to confirm their conference times and encourage them to attend.

Teachers—The role of teachers in arranging conferences involves planning and preparation. Some tips on preparation include

- Contact parents well in advance to arrange the conference.
- Send a personal letter or make a phone call outlining a specific but brief agenda that will interest the parents.

- Indicate that individual conferences are being held with all parents, and how important they are.
- Encourage parents to review class work brought home and to note questions, concerns, and comments to bring to the conference.
- Confirm the conference time by letter.
- Prepare for the conference by developing a conference folder with samples of the student's work and a list of the teacher's concerns and questions.
- Create a comfortable and private physical environment with enough adult-sized chairs and no desk separating teacher from parent.

During the Conference

Establish Rapport With Parents—Develop a relationship with parents by asking them about their work or about an interest you may know they have.

Accept Parents as Advocates—Provide parents with opportunities to speak about their children. Do not interpret a parent's advocacy as belligerence or as a criticism.

Emphasize the Positive—Indicate appreciation of the unique qualities of the child.

- Research suggests that parents use a teacher's knowledge of their child's personality or interests as a screening device. They are more willing to listen to a range of feedback about their child if they hear the teacher comment on the child's special qualities first.
- Recount a brief anecdote or story about the child before sharing positive or negative information on the child's performance.

Establish Priorities—Pick one or two areas for growth and improvement so that parents are not overwhelmed.

Learn From the Parents—Together, parents and teachers make a great team for student learning.

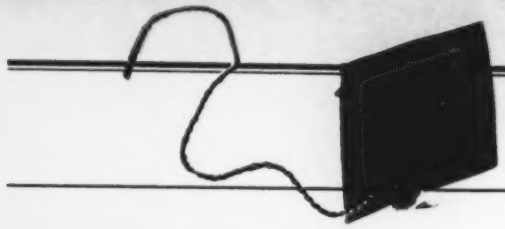
- Involve parents in creating solutions to problems.
- Devote at least half the conference to parents' concerns, ideas, and questions.

Action Steps—Close the conference with some action steps.

- Identify concrete suggestions for how the parents and the teacher will together help the child.
- Emphasize the parents' role in the education of the child, and ways the teacher can assist them.
- Provide resources and materials such as booklets that families can use at home to build student skills.
- Give parents specific times when they may call you.
- Plan to meet again if advisable.

After the Conference

- Keep brief notes about the conference; follow through and remember parents' concerns.
- Note and address any suggestions made and questions raised during the conference.
- Keep parents informed of any steps that you or other school personnel have taken and follow up with parents on actions that they were going to take.
- Share non-confidential helpful information about students and their families with colleagues, and seek the same from them.
- Contact other school staff where issues discussed involve their work.
- Follow-up the conference with a phone call or a note to all parents to show commitment to working as a team.



Home Visits

A home visiting program can show that the teachers, principal, and school staff are willing to "go more than halfway" to involve all parents in their children's education. Home visits help teachers demonstrate their interest in students' families and understand their students better by seeing them in their home environment.

These visits should not replace parent-teacher conferences or be used to discuss children's progress. When done early before any school problems can arise, they avoid putting any parents on the defensive and signal that teachers are eager to work with all parents. Teachers who have made home visits say they build stronger relationships with parents and their children, and improve attendance and achievement.

Planning

Administrators and teachers must agree to participate in the program and be involved in planning it.

These programs are successful when

- teachers' schedules are adjusted so that they have the necessary time;
- home visits are scheduled during just one month of the school year, preferably early; and
- visits are logged so that teachers and administrators can measure their benefits.

Strategies For Successful Home Visits

Who does the visiting?—Wherever possible, teachers should visit homes of children in their classes. If this is not possible, the principal should ensure that every home that requests a visit receives one.

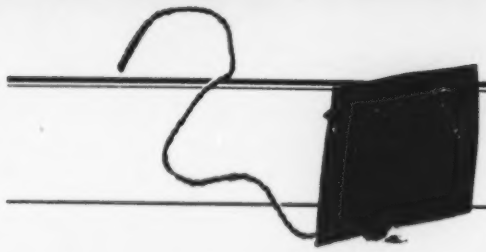
If teachers do not speak the parents' language, a translator needs to accompany them.

Scheduling—These suggestions may be helpful:

- Some schools have scheduled home visits in the afternoon right after school. Others have found that early evening is more convenient for parents. Some schedule visits right before a new school year begins. A mix of times may be needed to reach all families.
- Teachers should be given flexibility to schedule their visits during the targeted time period.
- Teachers of siblings may want to visit these children's homes together, but take care not to overwhelm parents.
- Some schools work with community groups (e.g., Boys and Girls Clubs, housing complexes, 4-H, Y's, and community centers) to schedule visits in neutral but convenient space.

Making parents feel comfortable—Here are some useful tips:

- Send a letter home to parents explaining the desire to have teachers make informal visits to all students' homes. Include a form that parents can mail back to accept or decline the visit.
- The letter should state clearly that the intent of this 15–30 minute visit is only to introduce the teacher and family members to each other, and not to discuss the child's progress.
- The letter might suggest that families think about special things their children would want to share with the teacher.
- The tone of the letter should try to lessen any parents' worries. One school included a note to parents which said, "No preparation is required. In fact, our homes need to be vacuumed and all of us are on diets!" This touch of humor and casualness helped to set a friendly and informal tone.
- A phone call to parents who have not responded can explain the plan for home visits and reassure parents that it is to get acquainted and not to evaluate students.
- Enlist community groups, religious organizations, and businesses to help publicize the home visits.



Parent Liaisons

Parent liaisons are members of the community who work with teachers, administrators, and parents to coordinate and advocate for family involvement to help students learn to high standards. Parent liaisons are often hired on a full or part time basis to provide continuity for the school's parent involvement initiatives.

Parent liaisons are the primary contact people who respond to the needs and concerns of particular parents and families. They may work especially to involve "hard to reach" parents. And they create ongoing mechanisms for parents to play various roles at the school and at home.

In these capacities parent liaisons can:

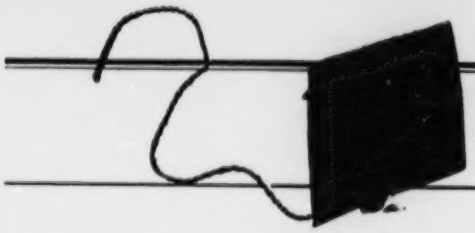
- Coordinate and implement outreach to traditionally non-participating families.
- Discuss with parents home learning activities suggested by schools (see *Homework and Home Learning* section).
- Conduct surveys of parent and teacher needs and interests and play matchmaker in promoting parent-teacher partnerships.
- Coordinate parent education events and parent volunteers.
- Create and publish school newsletters or other forms of communication.
- Coordinate school tours and orientation sessions for new families.

Parent liaisons can provide the leadership and resource coordination for many of the outreach strategies presented in this booklet. They are a legitimate use of Title I funds under the federal Improving America's Schools Act.

For school systems with limited funds, the position can be filled by members of an organized volunteer program. In small systems, the parent liaison functions and position can be systemwide rather than building based. In large schools, several parent liaisons might handle different grade levels.

Ongoing Communications

Some strategies can be easily reenacted through the school year. A school newsletter, for example, can be issued monthly or bimonthly. Phone calls to introduce the curriculum and teacher and tell each parent of their child's progress can be repeated as opportunities arise. Such calls counteract the feeling of many parents that schools only contact them when there is bad news. Giving parents ideas for home learning activities and how to assist with homework can also be done on a continuing basis. Research shows that involving parents in these ways is a very effective means to improve children's school performance. Thus many suggestions are offered in this area for things teachers, schools, and school systems might do.



Newsletters

Newsletters can provide a steady stream of information from the school to the home. They are used by many schools. A quality newsletter may well be the least expensive way of informing families of school activities and expectations.

As their name implies, newsletters provide readers with "news" in an informal "letter" style. They are useful when careful thought is given to: "Why have a newsletter?" "Who is the audience?" "What do we want to communicate?" "How should we present the information?"

Content

Timely, brief, and lively reporting are the hallmarks of an effective newsletter. Newsletters often include:

- How the school is working to improve the basics and discipline.
- Recent accomplishments of students in academic, athletic, artistic, and citizenship areas.
- New services of the school or changes in organization.
- Upcoming school events, schedule changes, conference times, and testing dates.
- Human interest items featuring students, parent volunteers, teachers, and other staff, or written by them.
- Articles on curriculum and teaching innovations.
- Scholarship application information and school-college connections.
- School-business partnerships, particularly family-friendly employers and school-to-career opportunities.
- Activities scheduled for parents, students, and community members and related transportation arrangements.
- After school child care and education programs.

Interactive Features

To promote two-way communication, newsletters can:

- Encourage parents to write letters to the newsletter.
- Provide an "op-ed" column that is open to anyone from the school community.
- Contain short questionnaires soliciting reader opinions on a variety of topics.

Format and Design

To attract the attention of parents, newsletters should be attractive, well-organized, and easily read. Assume that some parents may not be comfortable with reading or with English as their primary language. This suggests:

- Keep both sentences and paragraphs short.
- Use easy words unless a big word is needed for a precise meaning.
- Avoid education jargon and abbreviations.

Use language that is familiar and direct.

- Use simple techniques, such as boxes, graphics, and illustrations to call attention to special items.

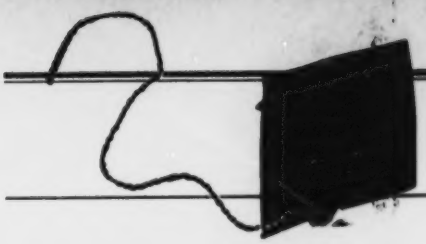
Production

In some schools, the PTA or parent-teacher organization produces the school newsletter. In schools with parent liaisons or outreach workers, they may assist or be in charge of editing the newsletter. In other schools, the newsletter is edited by a teacher or administrator and, especially in the upper grades, can become the project of a language arts or journalism class.

Many high schools have fairly sophisticated word processing, printing, and typesetting equipment

that are used to expose students to career-related communications technology. These publishing centers can be used to produce newsletters for the school and for other schools in the system.

A note on the first principle of newsletters: If the information is important enough to be sent to parents, it is important enough to be sent in the most attractive and readable form.



Positive Phone Calls

Imagine the impact when parents receive phone calls letting them know how much progress their children have made in recent weeks or asking if they need any information about school programs and expectations. Home-school communication is greatly increased through personal contacts such as this between teachers and parents.

When a telephone call from school carries information that is positive, the atmosphere between the home and the school is improved. It encourages everyone to believe that all children can learn.

Benefits of Positive Phone Calls

To be most effective, parents need to receive at least two or three positive phone calls over the course of the school year. Some topics for consideration are

- introducing the teacher to the parent;
- describing the child's curriculum;
- commenting on the child's progress;
- informing the parent of a special achievement or improvement by the child;
- telling the parent of particular strengths of the child and sharing an anecdote about them; and
- Inviting the parents to open houses, conferences, volunteering in the school, and other school functions.

While simple in concept, a positive phone call program does require time and effort. Strong support is needed from school administrators, who must provide teachers with the time, feedback, and resources they will need to implement this program. Teachers also need to be involved in the planning to ensure their commitment.

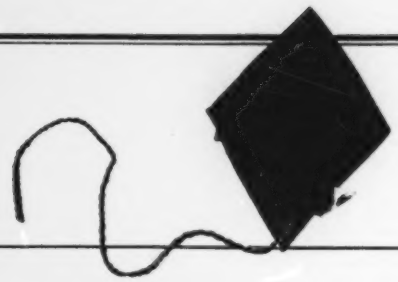
Since many parents work during the day, teachers may need to contact parents in the evenings or on weekends. Teachers will need to have some accommodations made in their work schedules to compensate them for this extra time.

In order to gain commitment from teachers, schools must be willing to:

- Make time available to staff. Positive telephone calls can be carried on during selected months of the year. During these periods, the workload of teachers can be adjusted.
- Provide a proper facility. The program will not succeed unless teachers have a private and comfortable place from which to make their calls. Schools may need, therefore, to install additional telephone lines in classrooms and in lounge areas.
- Provide translation services for parents as needed.
- Provide a feedback system. Teachers should maintain log books or calling index cards so that the school has a record of positive phone calls. In this way, teachers and administrators can have a clearer sense of the scope and effectiveness of their efforts on a schoolwide basis.

Parent Call-In

An outgrowth of personalized telephone communication at some schools is the parent call-in. Teachers or administrators set up a regular call-in hour on a weekly or bi-weekly basis. During this time, parents can call to discuss their questions or concerns. These calling hours are announced in school newsletters, flyers sent home, and at school meetings.



Homework and Home Learning

Research indicates that involving parents' as educators at home with their children is one of the most effective ways to improve students' attitudes toward school and their achievement. This form of parent involvement does not require that parents come to the school, which makes it more accessible for many parents. While research indicates that homework supervision and home learning activities are closely related to higher achievement for children, many parents want help to do these better. The combined efforts of the school system and individual teachers are needed to make this happen.

What Teachers Can Do

Homework—At the beginning of each year, many teachers:

- Emphasize to parents, through open house and written communications, that they should expect their children to have regular homework assignments and to complete them promptly.
- Request parents to negotiate clear rules with their children about where, when, and how homework is done each night and set clear expectations that children will tell their parents how much and what kinds of homework they have.
- Encourage parents to ensure that reference materials, such as dictionaries, are available in the home.
- Inform parents of any extra homework help available—homework hotlines, homework centers, after school tutors, and mentors.

Reading—Teachers are finding it increasingly important to:

- Tell parents how important it is to express positive attitudes about reading beginning early.
- Encourage parents to read to or with children each day even in the older elementary grades.
- Send home recommended reading lists or suggestions about how to use household materials, such as newspapers and magazines, to encourage reading.

Television—Understanding that in many homes television watching plays a major role in daily activity, many teachers:

- Communicate to parents the power of television as a positive and a negative educational experience.
- Inform parents that more than 2–3 hours of television viewing on school nights is related to lower student achievement.
- Encourage parents to select with their children the programs they may watch.
- Recommend ongoing programs which families may want to watch together and talk about afterward.
- Send home notices about special programs parents may want to watch with their children and suggestions for discussing issues that the program will highlight.

Learning Activities—Teachers send home ideas for family games and other informal learning activities related to school work, such as word games, puzzles, math challenges, and "kitchen sink" experiments for parents and children to enjoy together.

Field Trips—Many teachers send home suggestions for using community resources that may provide enjoyable educational experiences for parents and children, such as the town library, local historical sites, museums, music series, and cultural events.

What Schools Can Do

Parent Workshops or Conferences—Workshops or conferences are held by schools on topics such as:

- How to help children with reading.
- How to make home learning materials.
- How to create educational games with your children.
- Grade level math or reading instructions for parents who want to tutor their children.
- Learning about computers—keeping ahead of the kids.
- How to handle the challenges of teenagers.

Some teachers and schools also give formal instruction to show parents how to help their children in specific areas, such as math, or how to develop teaching skills.

Parent Training Programs and Outreach—Schools can respond to parents' requests for assistance with home learning in several ways:

- Hold ongoing training for groups of parents who want or need intensive help with home learning.
- Provide training and assistance to parents with limited English and those of "at risk" children.
- Hire outreach workers to visit parents in their homes to provide individualized assistance with home-learning activities.

Summer Activities Packets—Schools provide packets of materials, specifically designed for each grade level, that parents can use with their children over the summer. These activities and materials might include:

- Reading lists.
- Suggested summer field trips.
- Lists of community activities and summer programs.
- Math, science, and reading activities to do at home.
- Names of local organizations that provide summer tutoring in reading and other basic skills.

Schools can contact the national Read*Write*Now! program to match children with adults who will read together regularly with them. Call 1-800-USA-LEARN for information.

Voice Mail—Some schools have installed telephone answering systems that permit teachers to record homework assignments and suggestions to parents for home learning as well as giving parents a chance to leave messages when they need assistance. Parents and students can call at any time to keep abreast of daily coursework and class activities.

Computer Lending Libraries—Some schools allow students and parents to take home personal computers and software, or offer family classes on computing.

Hotlines-Cable TV—Schools offer parents and students help with homework and other school-related concerns through telephone hotlines staffed by teachers and "homework hours" on cable TV. These interactive resources let parents talk with teachers from their homes and have individual issues addressed.

What School Systems Can Do

As with all forms of parent involvement, the resources and support provided to individual teachers and parents by the school and school system will determine the quality of the home-learning effort. The essential ingredients for support of home learning are:

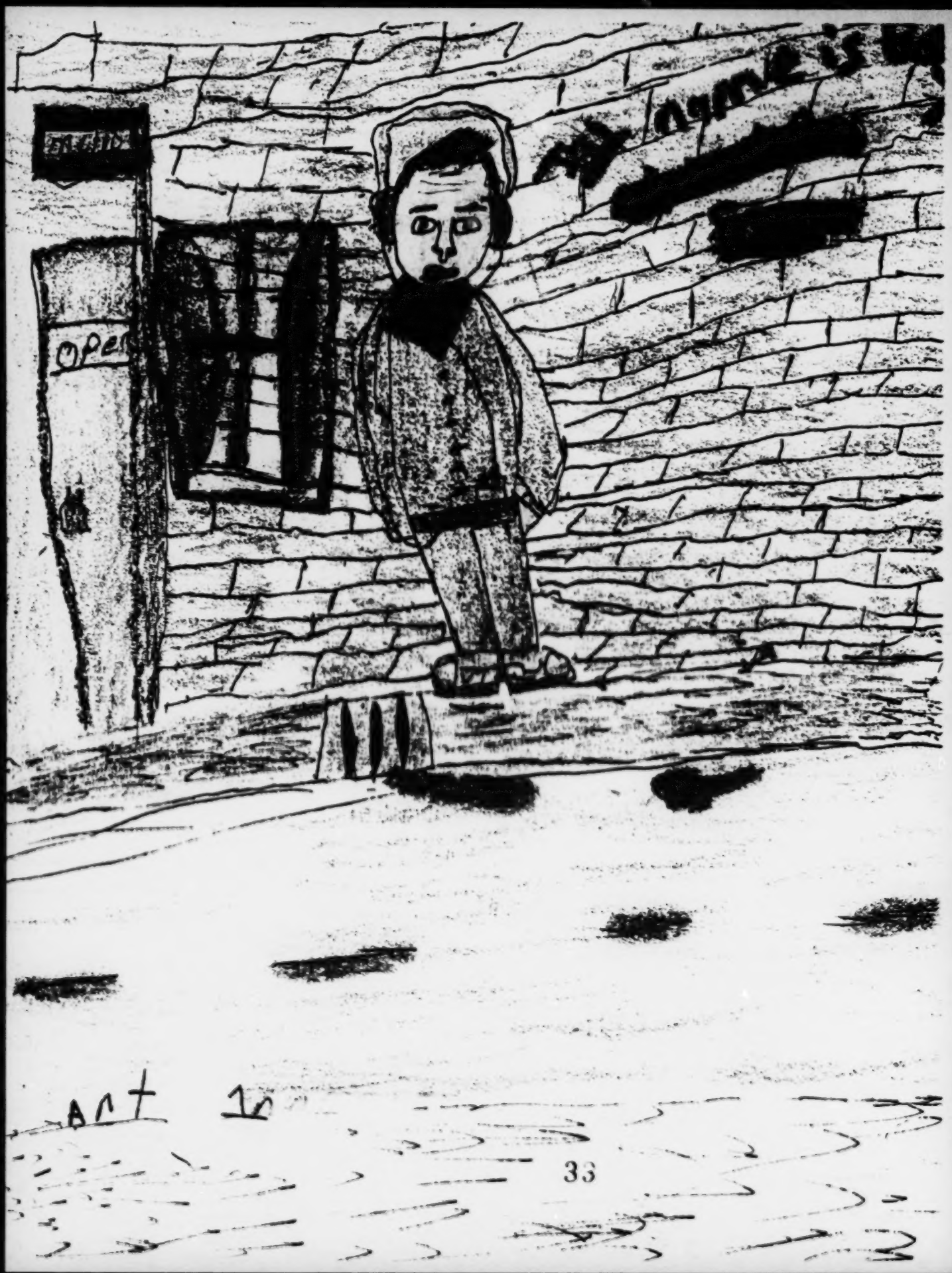
Policy—Administrators should make it clear that they recognize and are willing to help support the parent's role as educator at home and build positive teacher-parent connections. This philosophy should be communicated to parents through:

- The parent handbook and other policy documents.
- Letters and pamphlets to parents.
- Meetings and other parent forums.
- Personal contacts by teachers and other staff.
- Speeches before local groups and in the media.

Resources—Schools and school systems can demonstrate their commitment to partnerships by providing resources for home learning such as:

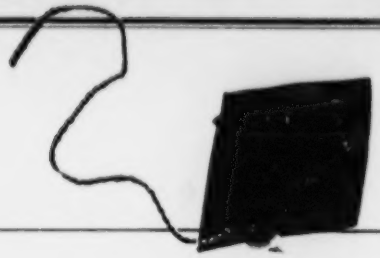
- Releasing staff to work with families and providing a budget for home-learning activities.
- Providing clerical and printing assistance to teachers when they develop materials for parents.
- Providing easy access to phones for teachers to call families.
- Investing in school programs on cable television.
- Building partnerships with local organizations to jointly support home learning activities.

Home-Learning Coordinator—Specialists and teachers need time to develop home-learning ideas and materials for themselves and for other teachers to use. Designating one or more persons to coordinate and help with the logistics of gathering and producing materials will ensure that home-learning materials are efficiently and effectively developed.


Art 10

Special Practices and Programs

This set of strategies includes some rather new and uncommon approaches to reaching all parents. One is resource centers in schools. In an informal setting they can provide parents with materials to help children learn more, offer space for personal and small class meetings, and help link parents to the school and community resources. Informal school-family gatherings around simple meals or refreshments with teachers and principals and neighborhood coffees are other ways to help create a welcoming atmosphere around schools. While parent workshops are widely used, the ideas presented here will help make them more effective. The final set of strategies shows ways of reducing some common obstacles to involvement among families of secondary students.



Parent Resource Centers

Parent resource centers in schools can support parents as both learners and teachers. These centers provide materials and a space where parents can get together with other parents and school staff to learn how to assist in their children's at-home learning. Parents can come to such a center for educational materials, training, informal meetings, and even for referral to other community services.

Parent resource centers may contain

- information about current school programs and events;
- reading materials to help parents guide their children's learning;
- games, books, and videos that parents can use with children at home, as well as toys and books for visiting pre-school children;
- a paid aide or volunteer who provides parents with instruction in subject areas and in using learning materials;
- a place where parents can "fill prescriptions" written by teachers for specific educational materials to be used at home;
- a "Parents Corner" with comfortable furniture where parents can talk with other parents and teachers who come into the center; and
- an exchange box where parents and teachers can drop off unwanted books, toys, and surplus household items and take or borrow them for their own use.

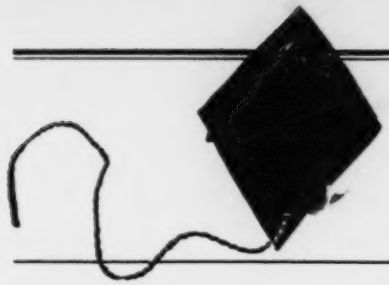
Parent resource centers send a very positive message to parents that they belong in the school and should feel welcome in it. Some have a coffee machine and other amenities to reinforce the welcome. Many have donated furnishings and equipment.

These centers can be used for a variety of purposes:

- meeting space for parent groups and workshops;
- an informal location for individual parent-teacher or parent-principal discussions;
- lounges and "waiting rooms" for parents in school on other business;
- recruiting tutors and classroom volunteers; and
- information and guidance about higher education opportunities, cultural and community services and agencies to help families with educational, health, and social service needs.

A parent resource center can be created in a spare classroom or a corner of a school library. The center will need some staffing by a paid aide, parent/community volunteer, or a rotating teacher.

Principals and central administration staff can encourage teachers working with parents to develop at-home learning activities as part of their curriculum. Principals and teachers may want to devote several professional development sessions to this task. Schools can also provide clerical and printing assistance to teachers who develop materials for parents.



Informal School-Family Gatherings

Individual teachers and school staff can create ways to involve families in significant gatherings at school or nearby in more informal settings than the open house or parent-teacher conference. Schools have found the following approaches useful:

Grade Level Sessions

Individual teachers or groups of teachers from the same grade level have invited their parents to an educational event geared especially for them. Topics of interest to parents might include the following:

- instruction on the computers their children are using in school;
- an introduction to a series of home-learning activities for use with their children;
- handling negative peer pressure, discipline, drugs; and
- getting ready for college.

Meet With the Principal

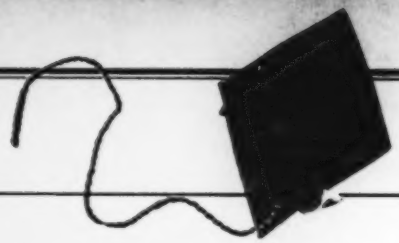
School principals have hosted monthly or bimonthly luncheons in the school cafeteria. These luncheons let parents engage in informal conversations with the principal and each other and can be organized schoolwide, by grade level, or by interest areas such as arts, special needs students, and advisory councils. Some principals also hold open hours when any parent can drop into their office.

Breakfast With the Teacher

Some teachers have invited parents to bring their children to school on a selected day and stay for an informal potluck breakfast. Parent volunteers help teachers organize these breakfasts which give parents an opportunity to meet with the teacher and with each other.

Neighborhood Coffees

Neighborhood coffees organized jointly by school staff and parents are held in homes, community centers, or other convenient locations. Some parents feel more comfortable meeting there than in schools. These get-togethers are designed to give a small group of parents an informal opportunity to talk with school staff about issues affecting their children. For example, neighborhood coffees might be organized for parents of sixth-grade children who will soon be going to junior high to share ideas on helping them with this important transition.



Parent Workshops

Parent education can include activities, workshops, and materials that give parents skills or experiences to help them as parents and as individuals. Successful parent workshops require careful planning and implementation. The following step-by-step process provides ideas that schools have found effective.

Assess Parent Needs

Successful, well-attended parent workshops respond to the specific needs of parents rather than what schools assume they need. Determining the interests of parents requires a broad-based needs assessment. There are several approaches:

Surveys—Questionnaires can be sent directly to all parents at the beginning of the school year. They can suggest topic areas to parents or can ask them to recommend areas of interest.

Home Visits—These visits provide an opportunity for workshop coordinators to develop programs based on personal, in-depth conversations with parents.

Informal Methods—There are other relatively quick and easy ways to gather ideas about the interests and needs of parents. Parents can be polled at all-school meetings, parent conferences, and advisory council meetings. Parents who use a resource room and parent aides are a good source of information.

Identify Resources

Once parent needs have been identified, schools look for resources to speak to these needs either internally or from outside agencies. Resources could come from universities, businesses, social service agencies, regional education centers, and other school systems. Depending on the topic, workshop leaders could include:

Specialists—physicians, lawyers, speech therapists, and social workers.

Skilled Parents—members of the parent group or the community who have the skills to train other parents.

Practitioners—staff of community agencies and health clinics; members of church groups and volunteer groups; paraprofessionals.

Educators—university professors, teachers, school or district staff, and community educators.

Recruit Participants

Parents need to be both informed and have their interest aroused. Advance notice of upcoming workshops with note of transportation and child care services is essential for parents to plan their schedules.

Written Materials—A parent newsletter can include articles on upcoming workshops and can be followed up with flyers that remind parents of the date, time, place, and topic of the workshop. Recruitment announcements should be circulated in all languages spoken by parents at the school and posted in strategic locations such as neighborhood centers, churches, supermarkets, and laundromats.

Home Visits—Personal contacts appeal to parents, especially if the visitor is a member of the community and speaks the language of the parent. Schools also inform parents about workshops and encourage their participation during regular home visits by parent liaisons and school staff.

Telephone Networking—When all parents of children at the school have telephones, schools have used telephone trees to contact and recruit parents. Some parents call a few other parents, and they in turn are asked to call others from a master list.

Announcements at Meetings—The school's open house, PTA meetings, advisory council sessions, and parent room gatherings provide good opportunities. Neighborhood centers, adult learning centers, churches, and other community institutions may also be willing to announce parent workshops.

Provide Support Services

Strategies that make it easier for all parents to attend include

- organizing on-site child care;
- reimbursing parents for child care costs;
- helping parents form carpools;
- reimbursing for bus fare;
- providing a school bus or shuttle to the workshop; and
- opening parent rooms. Some schools support parent education activities by providing permanent space for parent gatherings. In these parent rooms, parents can meet with other parents, use resource materials, and learn about other programs and services of the school.

Evaluate Success

Schools with strong parent education programs assess their activities to see whether they were successful, how they might be modified, and what activities should be added. Two useful ways to evaluate programs are:

Evaluation Forms—After each session, parents can be asked to fill out a short evaluation form. This form can include questions such as:

- What was the most useful?
- What was the least useful?
- What other information would you like a workshop to cover?
- What kinds of workshop experiences would you like in the future?

Group Discussion—After some workshops, parents are asked to share their thoughts about the effectiveness of the session. They can be asked questions similar to those that would be on an evaluation form or can have a free form discussion.

Secondary School Strategies

Research and experience indicate that parent participation falls off in the upper grades. Secondary schools can reduce some common obstacles to family involvement that stem from the organization and curriculum of the school, and help parents cope with the challenges of adolescence.

Welcome Parents

One set of obstacles stems from the sheer size and layout of many secondary schools which make them less than visitor friendly. Schools can become more friendly to visitors in these ways:

- Place clearly marked signs on the outside of the building showing where to enter.
- Instruct guards or other monitors to welcome parents who enter the building and assist them in finding their way.
- Expect office staff to assist parents in a prompt and friendly fashion.
- Rethink the wording of signs that command outsiders to "report to the office" on arrival.
- Create a welcome sign for parents in the entryway, and repeat it in all the languages spoken by families of the students.

Promote Closer Relationships

Another obstacle to family involvement is that students typically have many teachers. Parents can find it difficult to know which teacher to contact. Rarely does any one staff member have a complete picture of each student, except perhaps the guidance counselor. But they often have a heavy caseload of students, making it difficult to know each well.

Some secondary schools are reorganizing in ways that increase teachers' ability to form relationships with parents and students. Secondary schools can encourage family involvement in these ways:

- Create smaller units within the school through "clusters," "houses," schools-within-schools, and other organizational devices.
- Keep the same counselors throughout the high school years so that students have an ongoing relationship with at least one individual at the school.
- Create teams of teachers who stay with students for more than one year.
- Schedule periods for teaching teams to meet with each other to discuss students they all teach and how to build continuing relationships between the school and families.

Reach Out to Specific Groups

Secondary schools are attempting to reach out to special groups of families to address their specific needs:

- Meetings for limited-English parents with translators for major school meetings and parent-teacher conferences.
- Meetings for parents of students who want to attend college to discuss college options and financial aid programs.
- Meetings to describe options available in vocational-technical and work-study programs and career planning generally.

Explain the Curriculum

The secondary curriculum is often more complex and technical than the curriculum parents experienced in their own schooling. Parents may feel incapable of helping their children with questions and homework and intimidated about discussing curriculum concerns or issues with teachers. This has led some schools to offer the following kinds of programs to parents:

Training in School Subjects—Some schools offer workshops for parents in specific curriculum areas such as math so they, in turn, can tutor their children.

Parent-Student Workshops—Information sessions provide learning opportunities for the whole family. Sessions can be organized around math, science, computers, creative writing, and other topics. Parents and students can work together with hands-on activities and be given more activities to do at home.

Parent Homework Networks—Schools can help organize parent networks that supervise afternoon and evening homework sessions. These sessions are particularly useful for single or working parents. Several parents agree to host a group of children on a rotating basis and provide them with a supervised and quiet place to study and do homework. These networks require much coordination such as might be provided by a parent liaison, volunteer, or release time teacher.

Parent-Teacher-Student Study Group—Teachers in some schools engage parents in reading books that their children are reading and hold group discussion seminars with students and parents on issues that are raised in these books.

Understand the Needs of Adolescence

The changes of recent decades that we have seen in social patterns in this country are reflected in our secondary schools. Many social and developmental factors impact adolescents.

- Adolescents are faced with the social realities of peer pressure, alcohol and other drugs, appeals to sexuality, racism, and sexism. Schools and parents must understand the ways in which these factors affect students.
- In adolescence, children seek greater autonomy. Students may not want their parents to play the same role in their schooling that they once did.
- Parents of adolescent children are more likely to be divorced, single, or remarried than are parents of elementary school children.

Provide Assistance

Schools can assist in the parenting of adolescents.

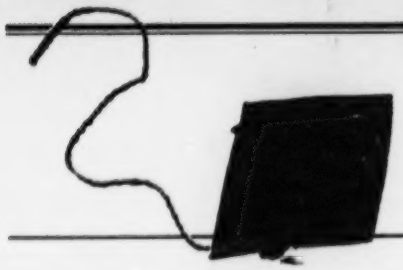
Parent Education—Many schools offer workshops and ongoing educational programs for parents on issues related to adolescent development. Parents are responsive to programs where they can learn about and discuss the difficult issues of adolescence. Some innovative programs link parents' educational activities with their children's curriculum. Students, for example, work in school on issues such as teenage suicide, drugs, and sexuality while parents are learning how to talk with their children about these issues.

School-Family-Community Partnerships—Schools also are engaging families in solving problems and taking action regarding specific issues, such as racial tension in the schools. Parents have collaborated with school staff to design programs that involve other community resources and agencies in addressing critical issues.

"What's Next" Nights—Schools are finding that parents are very concerned about what's next for their children after high school. Programs that address the transition to work after high school, college selection and financial assistance, and related topics should be offered to parents with children at all grade levels in the secondary schools so their planning for the future can start in a timely manner.

Parent Support Groups—Schools can involve parents in school programs by recognizing parents' need to have peer support during their children's adolescent years. Many parents appreciate the opportunity to share approaches and perspectives on parenting issues. Schools hold parenting workshops for parents and offer seminars for divorced and single parents to address their special needs.

Parents as Tutors and Mentors—Many parents have volunteered to be tutors or mentors to students at risk of failure, knowing that they especially need positive adult role models. These tutoring and mentoring programs take place in business, community, and school settings. Schools also are developing community service programs and other creative opportunities for students to go into the community and learn by working with adults.



Strategies for Children With Special Needs

Parents of students with special needs have been actively involved with teachers and administrators in their children's education for more than 20 years, as the diversity of their needs has been recognized and Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) have been developed to meet them. In fact, many of the suggestions in this book have already been successful in meeting the concerns of families who have children with special needs.

Parents of children with special needs often feel isolated and uncertain about their children's future. Schools can help parents find the facts and support they need to understand that they are not alone and that help is available within the community as well as the school. Teachers can help parents feel comfortable discussing their children's future by listening to the parents—who know their children better than anyone else—and by explaining school programs and answering questions in words that parents can easily understand.

What Administrators Can Do

Teachers and parents need support from schools and the community to help children with special needs reach their full potential. Schools can be both a clearinghouse for information and a place where parents can gather to support one another.

Administrators can help teachers and parents by

- establishing parent resource centers to help parents and teachers develop good working relationships;
- provide basic training to help parents understand special education and the role of the family in cooperative planning, as well as offering workshops on topics requested by parents;
- make available up-to-date information and resources for parents and teachers; and
- encourage creation of early childhood and preschool screening programs, and other community services that can be centered in the schools.

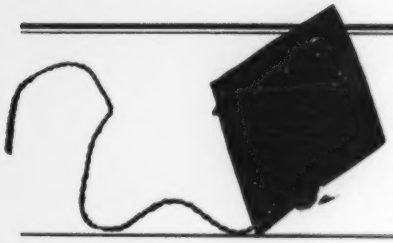
What Teachers Can Do

The relationship between teachers and parents of children with special needs is defined by specific programs with specific guidelines too detailed to summarize here. In addition to these guidelines, some general advice is available for teachers, including:

- make it clear to parents that you accept them as advocates who have an intense desire to make life better for their children;
- provide parents with information about support groups, special services in the school and the community, and family-to-family groups;
- offer to give parents referrals to helpful groups;
- encourage parents to organize support systems, pairing families who can share experiences with each other during school activities;
- involve parents in specific projects centered around hobbies or special skills that parents can share with students in one or several classes; and
- discuss a child's special talents with parents and use that positive approach as a bridge to discuss other issues.

Special Groups

In this final section, strategies are offered for involving parents who are often ignored or served poorly. The number of parents with limited English skills is increasing in many localities, and various tips on how schools have assisted them are provided. Single and working parents are found everywhere, and schools can use the practices suggested here to be sensitive to their circumstances. Fathers are also key family members, and their involvement with children's education is much needed. The last set of strategies shows different ways that schools and educators can reach out to them.



Involving Parents With Limited English Skills

Involving parents with limited English proficiency in their children's education can present special challenges. Creative approaches may be required as schools work to become partners with parents who have different cultural backgrounds and whose English is limited. Some strategies that have helped others include the following:

- Translate letters, notices, progress reports, school handbooks, and information packets into the languages of families of all students.
- Have individuals available to answer the school telephone who speak the languages of parents.
- Translate newsletters or key newsletter articles.
- Record phone messages in other languages so non-English speaking parents can also keep track of their children's coursework and school events.
- Use school newsletters to announce cultural and other events sponsored by other language groups represented in the school.
- Integrate bilingual and multicultural materials in school displays, publications, libraries, and classrooms.
- Use paid or volunteer interpreters to promote communication with limited English parents.
- Hire bilingual parent coordinators or find volunteers to meet with parents in their homes and at parent centers, churches, and other gathering places to talk about school-related issues.
- Recruit, train, and hire bilingual parents to be paraprofessionals in the schools.
- Make special efforts to welcome limited English proficient parents who visit the schools.

Developing Innovative Programs

Many schools have also developed innovative programs to help parents with limited English take part in their children's education:

School-Based Literacy and Family Nights—Literacy and other adult basic education programs are offered in schools with activities for children, such as homework tutoring and recreational activities, available at the same time.

Enrichment Programs—Schools work with adult education agencies to conduct enrichment programs designed for parents with limited English proficiency. These programs include workshops for skill development, field trips that provide educational experiences, and other special events.

English as a Second Language Adult Education Programs—These programs coordinate the education of parents with the education of their children. Materials used for English as a Second Language and literacy training are also used by children in their classrooms.

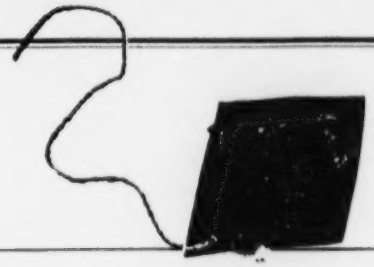
Utilizing All the Community's Resources—Ethnic communities often sponsor activities and events that enrich children's appreciation of their parents' cultural heritages. In connection with these events, teachers can integrate specific cultural knowledge into the curriculum by inviting parents to make presentations and undertake projects with students. Activities could include cooking classes, celebrations of holidays, craft fairs, and international dinners.

Respecting Culture

Communicating with limited English proficient parents will take sensitivity, time, and effort. It may involve, for example, respecting religious and cultural holidays when planning school events. Schools will need to help all teachers and other staff to:

- Explore research on stereotypes and prejudice toward the school's ethnic populations so as to challenge any misconceptions about them.
- Learn about these groups' cultural, family, and social structures and expectations regarding school systems.
- Identify community leaders and include them in school improvement efforts.

An advisory committee composed of parents and teachers from many cultures may help foster a positive climate for culturally diverse parents and students in the school.



Involving Single and Working Parents

An increasing number of children live in single parent and step families. Many also live in foster families, and other non-traditional family forms. And in many two-parent families both parents work full days, so children come home to an empty house. Involving single and working parents presents many challenges to schools.

Communication

Communication with single-parent and other non-traditional families will be more effective if schools

- Avoid making the assumption that students live with both biological parents.
- Avoid the traditional "Dear Parents" greeting in letters and other messages, and instead use "Dear Parent," "Dear Family," "Friends," or some other form of greeting.
- Develop a system of keeping non-custodial parents informed of their children's school progress.
- Demonstrate sensitivity to the rights of non-custodial parents. Inform parents that schools may not withhold information from non-custodial parents who have the legal right to see their children's records.
- Develop a simple unobtrusive system to keep track of family changes, such as these examples:
  - ✔ At the beginning of the year ask for the names and addresses of individuals to be informed about each child and involved in school activities.
  - ✔ At mid-year send a form to each child's parents or guardians to verify that the information is still accurate. Invite the parents or guardians to indicate any changes.
- Place flyers about school events on bulletin boards of major companies in the community which are family-friendly to learning.

These approaches use different and more sensitive ways of communicating with non-traditional families, and do not require much more material resources.

Involvement

The following practices can make the involvement of single and working parents in school life more feasible:

- Hold parent-teacher conferences and other school events in the evenings.
- Welcome other children at such events, and provide organized activities or child care services.
- Provide teachers and counselors with in-service training that sensitizes them to special problems faced by children of single and working parents and the parents themselves.
- Gather information on whether joint or separate parent conferences need to be scheduled with parents.
- Sponsor evening and weekend learning activities at which parents can participate and learn with their children.
- Work with local businesses to arrange released time from work so that parents can attend conferences, volunteer or in other ways spend time at their child's school when it is in session.

Workshops

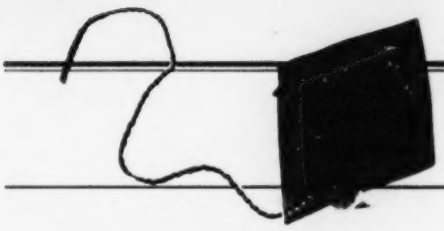
Schools can also offer parent education workshops on topics such as

- understanding the impact of separation and divorce on children;
- developing a safe and secure environment for latchkey children; and
- handling the multiple roles of the single parent.

The Community

Draw on the community. Schools can facilitate the involvement of single and working parents in their children's education by seeking cooperation and collaboration with resources in the community.

- Approach human service, cultural, social, and other organizations to suggest the development of programs and services that meet the needs of children and parents.
- Enlist the aid of high school students and senior citizens with whom before- and after-school recreational and child care programs can be developed.
- Form partnerships with organizations that can provide programs for children.
- Work with employers to encourage them to institute flexible hours for working parents who want to attend school activities.
- Use a variety of approaches to enable as many parents and children as possible to benefit from these programs.



Involving Fathers

Fathers are often the forgotten ones in family-oriented programs. Mothers have traditionally been more involved in the schools and community organizations. But with more mothers in the labor force and a growing recognition of the father's importance for child development, there is new interest in meaningful ways of involving dads in their children's education.

Schools can reach out to fathers in at least three ways: their basic orientation, their in-school programs, and encouragement of out-of-school learning activities.

Basic Orientation

All forms of communication to families need to mention fathers as well as mothers, assume that both will be interested, and encourage both to participate in school-sponsored activities. Further, non-custodial parents, who are usually fathers, need to be informed of these activities too unless there are strong reasons for not doing so. (See *Involving Single and Working Parents* section also.)

In-School Activities

These should be scheduled at times when all parents can attend, such as before school, in the evenings, or on weekends. They could include:

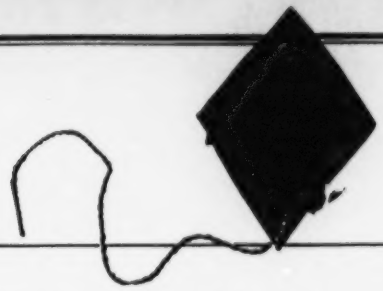
- Father-child breakfasts or dinners could provide an informal setting to meet teachers and school staff where adult male friends or father substitutes are also encouraged to come.
- In parent-teacher conferences, draw out the views of fathers and give them suggestions on ways to help children learn more at home.
- For school leadership positions such as PTA officers or advisory committee members, seek a balance of fathers and mothers.
- Volunteer positions should be filled from among both fathers and mothers who are free during the school day to help with activities such as being classroom aides or chaperons for field trips. The presence of fathers or even older men as hall monitors may help reduce school discipline problems.
- Fathers should be invited to help with special events such as constructing exhibit booths or judging contests.
- On career days ask fathers and mothers to tell how their education helped prepare them for their careers.

A special opportunity for fathers and mothers too is NetDay96. This is a nationwide effort to connect all classrooms to the Internet. Modeled on the successful California NetDay, every weekend in October volunteers will help hard-wire classrooms. For more information, contact NetDay96 by phone at (415) 553–2311 or by Internet at netday@kqed.org, http://www.netday96.com/

Out-of-School Activities

Fathers contribute to children's learning and development in many ways, and schools can assist them by:

- Making a point to invite fathers and make them feel welcome at workshops and courses on topics such as parenting skills, helping students learn non-violent ways to resolve conflicts, and exploring college and career opportunities.
- Creating support groups for parents experiencing the death or departure of a spouse, a difficult or disabled child, alienated teenagers, and other traumatic events.
- Providing training for fathers and other men as well as women to learn how to tutor students in basic subjects and mentor them in long-term relationships.
- Working with major local employers to adopt family-friendly policies such as releasing workers to attend school conferences, allowing flexible work schedules, and creating lunchtime seminars on family and home-school relations topics.



Services of the Department

The U.S. Department of Education promotes more family involvement in learning through a variety of means. The following resources may be helpful to schools:

Monthly Satellite Town Meetings

Satellite Town Meetings on education are co-sponsored by the National Alliance of Business. These interactive meetings give you the chance to share ideas about improving education with other Americans in communities all across the nation. Call 1–800–USA–LEARN for information.

Community Update

These newsletters are monthly publications that will keep you current on education news including family involvement activities and alert you to what other communities are doing to make their schools better. Call 1–800–USA–LEARN for information.

Family-Friendly Schools

Sign on as a family-friendly school. The Partnership for Family Involvement in Education needs your school. See the School-Family Partnership Promise at the end of this booklet.

Parent Resource Centers

Parental Information and Resource Centers have been established in many states to provide training, information, and support to parents and those who work with them from birth through high school. Network with the center in your state or a nearby state. Call (202) 401–0039 for center locations and information.

Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC)

Get the latest research information on education issues from AskEric@EricIR.syr.edu or call 1–800–LET–ERIC.

Online Library

Information about what works in partnerships is available from the U.S. Department of Education's online library: gopher.ed.gov or http://www.ed.gov

Related Publications

The following publications can be ordered free of charge from the U.S. Department of Education by calling 1–800–USA–LEARN:

America Goes Back to School: Partners' Activity Guide 1995–96

America Goes Back to School: Partners' Activity Kit 1996–97

Strong Families, Strong Schools: Building Community Partnerships for Learning. A Research Base for Family Involvement in Learning from the U.S. Department of Education.

Reading Literacy in the United States. Findings From the IEA Reading Literacy Study from the U.S. Department of Education.

Team up for Kids! How Schools Can Support Family Involvement in Education

Be Family-Friendly: It's Good Business

Join Together for Kids! How Communities Can Support Family Involvement in Education

Summer Home Learning Recipes

Helping Your Child Learn Series

Learning Partners Series

49

JOIN THE PARTNERSHIP FOR FAMILY INVOLVEMENT IN EDUCATION...
FAMILY-SCHOOL PARTNERSHIP PROMISE

Families and schools across America are increasingly accepting mutual responsibility for children's learning. When families are involved in children's learning, at school and at home, schools work better and students learn more. Schools and families are working with employers and community organizations to develop local partnerships that support a safe school environment where students learn to challenging standards. By working together, exchanging information, sharing decision-making, and collaborating in children's learning, everyone can contribute to the education process.

Coming together as families, local school board governance, administration, teachers and school staff, we form this partnership and affirm the importance of family involvement in children's learning. We pledge to:

- **Share responsibility** at school and at home to give students a better education and a good start in life.

  --Our school will be welcoming to families; reach out to families before problems arise; offer challenging courses; create safe and drug-free learning environments; organize tutoring and other opportunities to improve student learning; and support families to be included in the school decision-making process.

  --Our families will monitor student attendance, homework completion and television watching; take the time to talk with and listen to their children; become acquainted with teachers, administrators and school staff; read with younger children and share a good book with a teen; volunteer in school when possible; and participate in the school decision-making process.

- Promote effective **two-way communication** between families and schools, by schools reducing educational jargon and breaking down cultural and language barriers and by families staying in touch with the school.

- **Provide opportunities** for families to learn how to help their children succeed in school and for school staff to work with families.

- Support family-school efforts to improve student learning by **reviewing** progress regularly and strengthening cooperative actions.

We would like to become a member of the Partnership for Family Involvement in Education. We commit to family-friendly practices and will work with others to form partnerships that support children's learning. (Please type or print the following.)

School_____

Principal_____ Signature_____

Parent Organization Representative_____ Signature_____

Teacher Representative_____ Signature_____

School Staff Representative_____ Signature_____

Contact person_____ Title_____

Address_____

City_____ State_____ Zip_____

Phone_____ Fax_____ E-mail_____

Send to: Partnership for Family Involvement in Education, 600 Independence Avenue, SW, Washington, DC 20202-8173 or fax to 202/401-3036 to receive your Family-School Partnership Promise certificate.

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